CHAPTER XXI

INFLUENCING BY NARRATION

The art of narration is the art of writing in hooks and eyes. The principle consists in making the appropriate thought follow the appropriate thought, the proper fact the proper fact; in first preparing the mind for what is to come, and then letting it come.

—WALTER BAGEHOT, *Literary Studies*.

Our very speech is curiously historical. Most men, you may observe, speak only to narrate; not in imparting what they have thought, which indeed were often a very small matter, but in exhibiting what they have undergone or seen, which is a quite unlimited one, do talkers dilate. Cut us off from Narrative, how would the stream of conversation, even among the wisest, languish into detached handfuls, and among the foolish utterly evaporate! Thus, as we do nothing but enact History, we say little but recite it.

—THOMAS CARLYLE, *On History*.

Only a small segment of the great field of narration offers its resources to the public speaker, and that includes the anecdote, biographical facts, and the narration of events in general.

Narration—more easily defined than mastered—is the recital of an incident, or a group of facts and occurrences, in such a manner as to produce a desired effect.

The laws of narration are few, but its successful practise involves more of art than would at first appear—so much, indeed, that we cannot even touch upon its technique here, but must content ourselves with an examination of a few examples of narration as used in public speech.

In a preliminary way, notice how radically the public speaker’s use of narrative differs from that of the storywriter in the more limited scope, absence of extended dialogue and character drawing, and freedom from elaboration of detail, which characterize platform narrative. On the other hand, there are several similarities of method: the frequent combination of

narration with exposition, description, argumentation, and pleading; the care exercised in the arrangement of material so as to produce a strong effect at the close (climax); the very general practise of concealing the "point" (dénouement) of a story until the effective moment; and the careful suppression of needless, and therefore hurtful, details.

So we see that, whether for magazine or platform, the art of narration involves far more than the recital of annals; the succession of events recorded requires a *plan* in order to bring them out with real effect.

It will be noticed, too, that the literary style in platform narration is likely to be either less polished and more vigorously dramatic than in that intended for publication, or else more fervid and elevated in tone. In this latter respect, however, the best platform speaking of today differs from the models of the preceding generation, wherein a highly dignified, and sometimes pompous, style was thought the only fitting dress for a public deliverance. Great, noble and stirring as these older masters were in their lofty and impassioned eloquence, we are sometimes oppressed when we read their sounding periods for any great length of time—even allowing for all that we lose by missing the speaker's presence, voice, and fire. So let us model our platform narration, as our other forms of speech, upon the effective addresses of the moderns, without lessening our admiration for the older school.

The Anecdote

An anecdote is a short narrative of a single event, told as being striking enough to bring out a point. The keener the point, the more condensed the form, and the more suddenly the application strikes the hearer, the better the story.

To regard an anecdote as an illustration—an interpretive picture—will help to hold us to its true purpose, for a purposeless story is of all offenses on the platform the most asinine. A perfectly capital joke will fall flat when

it is dragged in by the nape without evident bearing on the subject under discussion. On the other hand, an apposite anecdote has saved many a speech from failure.

“There is no finer opportunity for the display of tact than in the introduction of witty or humorous stories into a discourse. Wit is keen and like a rapier, piercing deeply, sometimes even to the heart. Humor is good-natured, and does not wound. Wit is founded upon the sudden discovery of an unsuspected relation existing between two ideas. Humor deals with things out of relation—with the incongruous. It was wit in Douglass Jerrold to retort upon the scowl of a stranger whose shoulder he had familiarly slapped, mistaking him for a friend: ‘I beg your pardon, I thought I knew you—but I’m glad I don’t.’ It was humor in the Southern orator, John Wise, to liken the pleasure of spending an evening with a Puritan girl to that of sitting on a block of ice in winter, cracking hailstones between his teeth.”[1]

The foregoing quotation has been introduced chiefly to illustrate the first and simplest form of anecdote—the single sentence embodying a pungent saying.

Another simple form is that which conveys its meaning without need of “application,” as the old preachers used to say. George Ade has quoted this one as the best joke he ever heard:

> Two solemn-looking gentlemen were riding together in a railway carriage. One gentleman said to the other: “Is your wife entertaining this summer?” Whereupon the other gentleman replied: “Not very.”

Other anecdotes need harnessing to the particular truth the speaker wishes to carry along in his talk. Sometimes the application is made before the story is told and the audience is prepared to make the comparison, point by point, as the illustration is told. Henry W. Grady used this method in one of the anecdotes he told while delivering his great extemporaneous address, “The New South.”

Age does not endow all things with strength and virtue, nor are all new things to be despised. The shoemaker who put over his door, “John Smith’s shop, founded 1760,” was more than matched by his young rival across the street who hung out this sign: “Bill Jones. Established 1886. No old stock kept in this shop.”

In two anecdotes, told also in “The New South,” Mr. Grady illustrated another way of enforcing the application: in both instances he split the idea he wished to drive home, bringing in part before and part after the recital of the story. The fact that the speaker misquoted the words of Genesis in which the Ark is described did not seem to detract from the burlesque humor of the story.

I bespeak the utmost stretch of your courtesy tonight. I am not troubled about those from whom I come. You remember the man whose wife sent him to a neighbor with a pitcher of milk, who, tripping on the top step, fell, with such casual interruptions as the landings afforded, into the basement, and, while picking himself up, had the pleasure of hearing his wife call out:

“John, did you break the pitcher?

“No, I didn’t,” said John, “but I be dinged if I don’t.”

So, while those who call to me from behind may inspire me with energy, if not with courage, I ask an indulgent hearing from you. I beg that you will bring your full faith in American fairness and frankness to judgment upon what I shall say. There was an old preacher once who told some boys of the Bible lesson he was going to read in the morning. The boys, finding the place, glued together the connecting pages. The next morning he read on the bottom of one page: “When Noah was one hundred and twenty years old he took unto himself a wife, who was”—then turning the page—“one hundred and forty cubits long, forty cubits wide, built of gopher wood, and covered with pitch inside and out.” He was naturally puzzled at this. He read it again, verified it, and then said, “My friends, this is the first time I ever met this in the Bible, but I accept it as an evidence of the assertion that we are fearfully and wonderfully made.” If I could get you to hold such faith to-night, I could proceed cheerfully to the task I otherwise approach with a sense of consecration.

Now and then a speaker will plunge without introduction, into an anecdote, leaving the application to follow. The following illustrates this method:

A large, slew-footed darky was leaning against the corner of the railroad station in a Texas town when the noon whistle in the canning factory blew and the hands hurried out, bearing their grub buckets. The darky listened, with his head on one side until the rocketing echo had quite died away. Then he heaved’ a deep sigh and remarked to himself:

“Dar she go. Dinner time for some folks—but jes’ 12 o’clock fur me!”

That is the situation in thousands of American factories, large and small, today. And why? etc., etc.

Doubtless the most frequent platform use of the anecdote is in the pulpit. The sermon “illustration,” however, is not always strictly narrative in form, but tends to extended comparison, as the following from Dr. Alexander Maclaren:

Men will stand as Indian fakirs do, with their arms above their heads until they stiffen there. They will perch themselves upon pillars like Simeon Stylites, for years, till the birds build their nests in their hair. They will measure all the distance from Cape Comorin to Juggernaut’s temple with their bodies along the dusty road. They will wear hair shirts and scourge themselves. They will fast and deny themselves. They will build cathedrals and endow churches. They will do as many of you do, labor by fits and starts all thru your lives at the endless task of making yourselves ready for heaven, and winning it by obedience and by righteousness. They will do all these things and do them gladly, rather than listen to the humbling message that says, “You do not need to do anything—wash.” Is it your washing, or the water, that will clean you? Wash and be clean! Naaman’s cleaning was only a test of his obedience, and a token that it was God who cleansed him. There was no power in Jordan’s waters to take away the taint of leprosy. Our cleansing is in that blood of Jesus Christ that has the power to take away all sin, and to make the foulest amongst us pure and clean.

One final word must be said about the introduction to the anecdote. A clumsy, inappropriate introduction is fatal, whereas a single apt or witty sentence will kindle interest and prepare a favorable hearing. The following extreme illustration, by the English humorist, Captain Harry Graham, well satirizes the stumbling manner:

The best story that I ever heard was one that I was told once in the fall of 1905 (or it may have been 1906), when I was visiting Boston—at least, I think it was Boston; it may have been Washington (my memory is so bad).

I happened to run across a most amusing man whose name I forget—Williams or Wilson or Wilkins; some name like that—and he told me this story while we were waiting for a trolley car.

I can still remember how heartily I laughed at the time; and again, that evening, after I had gone to bed, how I laughed myself to sleep recalling the humor of this incredibly humorous story. It was really quite extraordinarily funny. In fact, I can truthfully affirm that it is quite the most amusing story I have ever had the privilege of hearing. Unfortunately, I’ve forgotten it.

Biographical Facts

Public speaking has much to do with personalities; naturally, therefore, the narration of a series of biographical details, including anecdotes among the recital of interesting facts, plays a large part in the eulogy, the memorial address, the political speech, the sermon, the lecture, and other platform deliverances. Whole addresses may be made up of such biographical details, such as a sermon on “Moses,” or a lecture on “Lee.”

The following example is in itself an expanded anecdote, forming a link in a chain:

MARIUS IN PRISON

The peculiar sublimity of the Roman mind does not express itself, nor is it at all to be sought, in their poetry. Poetry, according to the Roman ideal of it, was not an adequate organ for the grander movements of the national mind. Roman sublimity must be looked for in Roman acts, and in Roman sayings. Where, again, will you find a more adequate expression of the Roman majesty, than in the saying of Trajan—*Imperatorem oportere stantem mori*—that Cæsar ought to die standing; a speech of imperatorial grandeur! Implying that he, who was “the foremost man of all this world,”—and, in regard to all other nations, the representative of his own,—should express its characteristic virtue in his farewell act—should die *in procinctu*—and should meet the last enemy as the first, with a Roman countenance and in a soldier’s attitude. If this had an imperatorial—what follows had a consular majesty, and is almost the grandest story upon record.

Marius, the man who rose to be seven times consul, was in a dungeon, and a slave was sent in with commission to put him to death. These were the persons,—the two extremities of exalted and forlorn humanity, its vanward and its rearward man, a Roman consul and an abject slave. But their natural relations to each other were, by the caprice of fortune, monstrously inverted: the consul was in chains; the slave was for a moment the arbiter of his fate. By what spells, what magic, did Marius reinstate himself in his natural prerogatives? By what marvels drawn from heaven or from earth, did he, in the twinkling of an eye, again invest himself with the purple, and place between himself and his assassin a host of shadowy lictors? By the mere blank supremacy of great minds over weak ones. He *fascinated* the slave, as a rattlesnake does a bird. Standing “like Teneriffe,” he smote him with his eye, and said, “*Tune, homo, audes occidere C. Marium?”*—“Dost thou, fellow, presume to kill Caius Marius?” Whereat, the reptile, quaking under the voice, nor daring to affront the consular eye, sank gently to the ground—turned round upon his hands and feet—and, crawling out of the prison like any other vermin, left Marius standing in solitude as steadfast and immovable as the capitol.

—THOMAS DE QUINCY.

Here is a similar example, prefaced by a general historical statement and concluding with autobiographical details:

A REMINISCENCE OF LEXINGTON

One raw morning in spring—it will be eighty years the 19th day of this month—Hancock and Adams, the Moses and Aaron of that Great Deliverance, were both at Lexington; they also had "obstructed an officer" with brave words. British soldiers, a thousand strong, came to seize them and carry them over sea for trial, and so nip the bud of Freedom auspiciously opening in that early spring. The town militia came together before daylight, "for training." A great, tall man, with a large head and a high, wide brow, their captain,—one who had "seen service,"—marshalled them into line, numbering but seventy, and bade "every man load his piece with powder and ball. I will order the first man shot that runs away," said he, when some faltered. "Don't fire unless fired upon, but if they want to have a war, let it begin here."

Gentlemen, you know what followed; those farmers and mechanics "fired the shot heard round the world." A little monument covers the bones of such as before had pledged their fortune and their sacred honor to the Freedom of America, and that day gave it also their lives. I was born in that little town, and bred up amid the memories of that day. When a boy, my mother lifted me up, one Sunday, in her religious, patriotic arms, and held me while I read the first monumental line I ever saw —"Sacred to Liberty and the Rights of Mankind."

Since then I have studied the memorial marbles of Greece and Rome, in many an ancient town; nay, on Egyptian obelisks have read what was written before the Eternal raised up Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt; but no chiseled stone has ever stirred me to such emotion as these rustic names of men who fell "In the Sacred Cause of God and their Country."

Gentlemen, the Spirit of Liberty, the Love of Justice, were early fanned into a flame in my boyish heart. That monument covers the bones of my own kinsfolk; it was their blood which reddened the long, green grass at Lexington. It was my own name which stands chiseled on that stone; the tall captain who marshalled his fellow farmers and mechanics into stern array, and spoke such brave and dangerous words as opened the war of American Independence,—the last to leave the field,—was my father's father. I learned to read out of his Bible, and with a musket he that day captured from the foe, I learned another religious lesson, that "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God." I keep them both "Sacred to Liberty and the Rights of Mankind," to use them both "In the Sacred Cause of God and my Country."

—THEODORE PARKER.

Narration of Events in General

In this wider, emancipated narration we find much mingling of other forms of discourse, greatly to the advantage of the speech, for this truth

cannot be too strongly emphasized: The efficient speaker cuts loose from form for the sake of a big, free effect. The present analyses are for no other purpose than to *acquaint* you with form—do not allow any such models to hang as a weight about your neck.

The following pure narration of events, from George William Curtis's "Paul Revere's Ride," varies the biographical recital in other parts of his famous oration:

That evening, at ten o'clock, eight hundred British troops, under Lieutenant-Colonel Smith, took boat at the foot of the Common and crossed to the Cambridge shore. Gage thought his secret had been kept, but Lord Percy, who had heard the people say on the Common that the troops would miss their aim, undeceived him. Gage instantly ordered that no one should leave the town. But as the troops crossed the river, Ebenezer Dorr, with a message to Hancock and Adams, was riding over the Neck to Roxbury, and Paul Revere was rowing over the river to Charlestown, having agreed with his friend, Robert Newman, to show lanterns from the belfry of the Old North Church—"One if by land, and two if by sea"—as a signal of the march of the British.

The following, from the same oration, beautifully mingles description with narration:

It was a brilliant night. The winter had been unusually mild, and the spring very forward. The hills were already green. The early grain waved in the fields, and the air was sweet with the blossoming orchards. Already the robins whistled, the bluebirds sang, and the benediction of peace rested upon the landscape. Under the cloudless moon the soldiers silently marched, and Paul Revere swiftly rode, galloping through Medford and West Cambridge, rousing every house as he went spurring for Lexington and Hancock and Adams, and evading the British patrols who had been sent out to stop the news.

In the succeeding extract from another of Mr. Curtis's addresses, we have a free use of allegory as illustration:

THE LEADERSHIP OF EDUCATED MEN

There is a modern English picture which the genius of Hawthorne might have inspired. The painter calls it, "How they met themselves." A man and a woman, haggard and weary, wandering lost in a somber wood, suddenly meet the shadowy figures of a youth and a maid. Some mysterious fascination fixes the gaze and stills the hearts of the wanderers, and their amazement deepens into

awe as they gradually recognize themselves as once they were; the soft bloom of youth upon their rounded cheeks, the dewy light of hope in their trusting eyes, exulting confidence in their springing step, themselves blithe and radiant with the glory of the dawn. Today, and here, we meet ourselves. Not to these familiar scenes alone—yonder college-green with its reverend traditions; the halcyon cove of the Seekonk, upon which the memory of Roger Williams broods like a bird of calm; the historic bay, beating forever with the muffled oars of Barton and of Abraham Whipple; here, the humming city of the living; there, the peaceful city of the dead;—not to these only or chiefly do we return, but to ourselves as we once were. It is not the smiling freshmen of the year, it is your own beardless and unwrinkled faces, that are looking from the windows of University Hall and of Hope College. Under the trees upon the hill it is yourselves whom you see walking, full of hopes and dreams, glowing with conscious power, and "nourishing a youth sublime;" and in this familiar temple, which surely has never echoed with eloquence so fervid and inspiring as that of your commencement orations, it is not yonder youths in the galleries who, as they fondly believe, are whispering to yonder maids; it is your younger selves who, in the days that are no more, are murmuring to the fairest mothers and grandmothers of those maids.

Happy the worn and weary man and woman in the picture could they have felt their older eyes still glistening with that earlier light, and their hearts yet beating with undiminished sympathy and aspiration. Happy we, brethren, whatever may have been achieved, whatever left undone, if, returning to the home of our earlier years, we bring with us the illimitable hope, the unchilled resolution, the inextinguishable faith of youth.

—GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Clip from any source ten anecdotes and state what truths they may be used to illustrate.

2. Deliver five of these in your own language, without making any application.

3. From the ten, deliver one so as to make the application before telling the anecdote.

4. Deliver another so as to split the application.

5. Deliver another so as to make the application after the narration.

6. Deliver another in such a way as to make a specific application needless.

7. Give three ways of introducing an anecdote, by saying where you heard it, etc.

8. Deliver an illustration that is not strictly an anecdote, in the style of Curtis's speech on page 259.

9. Deliver an address on any public character, using the forms illustrated in this chapter.

10. Deliver an address on some historical event in the same manner.

11. Explain how the sympathies and viewpoint of the speaker will color an anecdote, a biography, or a historical account.

12. Illustrate how the same anecdote, or a section of a historical address, may be given two different effects by personal prejudice.

13. What would be the effect of shifting the viewpoint in the midst of a narration?

14. What is the danger of using too much humor in an address? Too much pathos?

[1] *How to Attract and Hold an Audience*, J. Berg Esenwein.